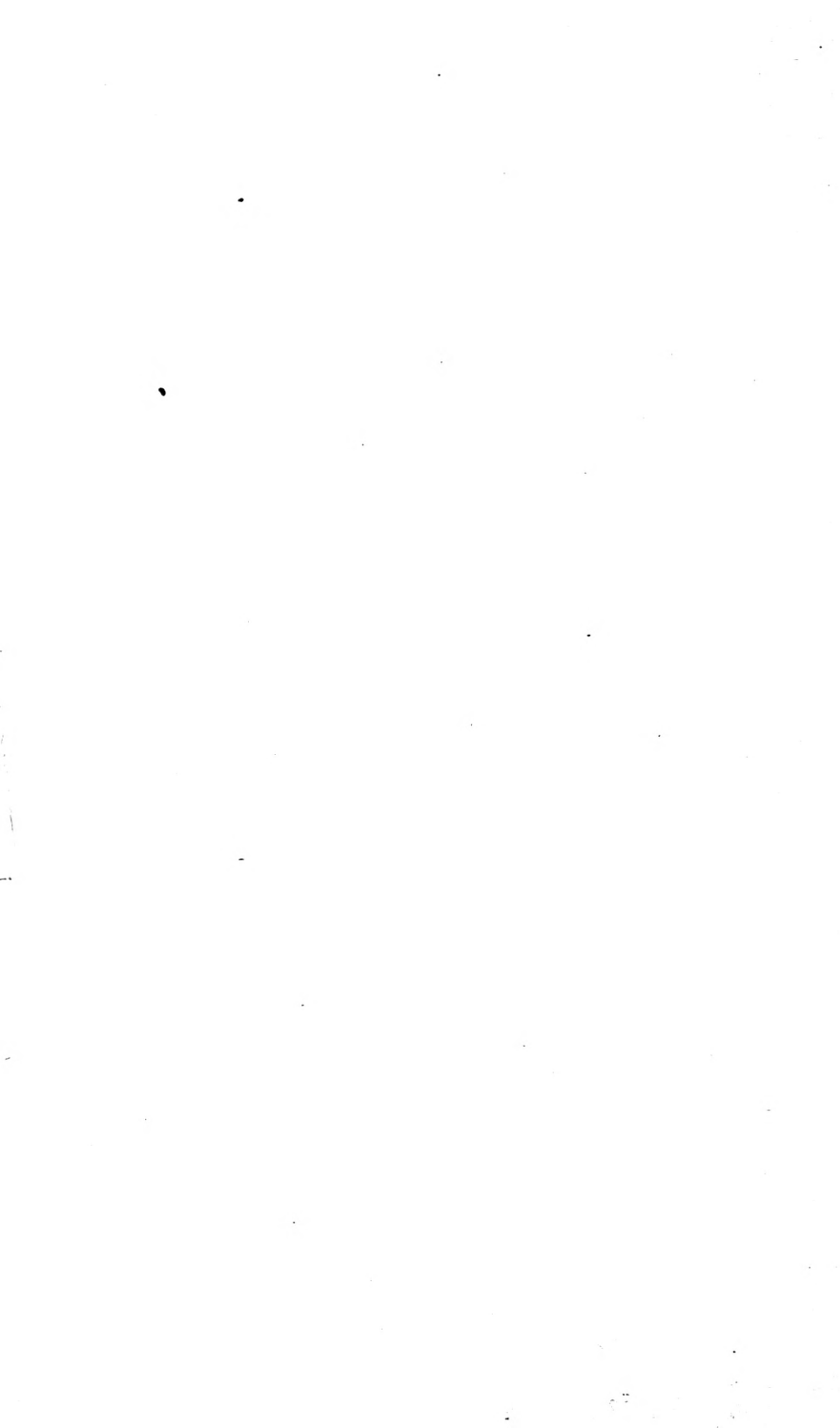


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Frank Walker

THE HOLY CITY

ITS LIGHT AND ITS GLORY

A SERMON

PREACHED IN ST. PAUL'S CATHEDRAL

ON THE OCCASION OF THE

199th Anniversary Service

OF THE

SOCIETY FOR THE PROPAGATION OF THE GOSPEL
IN FOREIGN PARTS

BY THE

RIGHT REV. J. W. FESTING, D.D.

LORD BISHOP OF ST ALBANS

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SERMON.

“The nations shall walk amid the light thereof: and the kings of the earth do bring their glory into it.”—REV. xxi. 24 (Revised Version).

THE Apostle is speaking of the Holy City, New Jerusalem, which he saw in vision coming down out of heaven from God.

He had seen in vision the destruction of the great world city Babylon, and the former things had passed away and a new heaven and a new earth were shown him, and, in this new state of existence, the true city, the city of God, not of man's foundation, nor man's building, nor man's planning. Its form, its arrangement, its defences, its life is of God. It is a vast city, a large tract of country, reaching away beyond the limits of man's natural vision—there is room there for the great multitude that are to be gathered into it; it is very glorious, having the glory of God, and in it and through it the tabernacle of God is with men and He shall dwell with them. Christ's promise to the faithful soul is fulfilled: “We will come unto him and make our abode with him.” And so the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of that city, for the people of God who are that city dwell in Christ and in God. “And the glory

of God did lighten it, and the lamp thereof is the Lamb." He, the Lamb, in His character, His office, His work, declares God, shows forth the glory of God, and so is the "lamp" that lightens this Holy City.

It is the vision of the Church of God that is before us, not the vision only of that which shall be, the vision of the Church glorified, but the vision of the Church now in her spiritual condition. The city is seen in the vision in the process of coming down out of heaven from God, though it is seen in its perfect form and glory; it is in the process of being formed even while its form is determined. It is the purpose of God that is presented to us, that purpose which will indeed be complete and established for ever at the end, but which even now exists complete, for it is the purpose of God, while its accomplishment is being wrought out in the course of the years of man's life on earth. So it is that in this vision there is presented to us the Divine idea of the Church, certain marks of the Church are set before us which we are to bear in mind as we think of the Church, its place, its office in the world, its relation to the world, its destiny, its true ambition in its work, its hopes.

In this figure of the Holy City, as in other figures in the Bible, notably in that used by St. Paul in his Epistle to the Ephesians, the rising up of a building, built upon the foundation of apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ being the chief Corner Stone, which groweth unto a holy temple in the Lord, there is a blending of metaphor. The figure expresses two truths. The people of God are the city, the stones of the building, and yet they are the citizens who dwell in the city. The Church consists of the believers in Christ, but is also the home of the faithful. They form the Church, and at the same time the Church is something which contains them; it is in a

way outside them, it teaches them, it ministers to them, it provides for them the means through which spiritual life comes to them, and is sustained and developed.

“The nations do walk amid the light of the city of God : and the kings of the earth do bring their glory into it.”

The Holy City manifests in the world the glory of God and of the Lamb, and there is that which can illumine and inspire, and direct and purify, and ennoble the ways, the life of the nations of the earth. That is part of the glory of that city, and then the kings of the earth, the great ones, the rulers of men, the leaders in thought and action, those to whom men look up, those whom they reverence and honour, and follow and obey, bring their glory into it. And so the glory of the city is in a way enhanced. The glory is indeed of God, but God's glory is manifested in the devotion of that which is best in man to the service of God, and this service of man blesses the life of his fellow-men, and promotes its true happiness and its real glory.

The continued work of the formation of the city and the diversities of life that are brought together in the city are alike set before us.

In St. Paul's idea of the gradual building of the temple as in this idea of the city we have not only the idea of continuous work but of variety. A building and a city are composed of various materials, and have various parts. As this spiritual building goes forward men of different times and of different countries are brought into it. The great men of successive generations, the great men of nations differing very much in life and character, bring their glory into it. No one generation, no one nation, exhausts the possibilities of human life and character. And in our own time and generation and nation what infinite diversity of life and character exists, all of it possible of sanctification without losing the diversity.

This difference between men, not only of different nations, but between men of different generations in the same country, is very striking. It is not only the difference in life from the difference of surroundings that strikes us, not only the difference such as—to take striking examples—there is between the life of the Christian when persecution was rife and our life now, or between the life of the ordinary Christian amid the ignorance and the commotions of the middle ages and ours now, but the differences which arise from what may almost be called fashions of thought about religious matters which prevail for a time. How many words there are which provoked deep anxious thought and were the watchwords of passionate controversy in years that are past that stir no deep feelings now! Who now is stirred as men once were by the words predestination, election, final assurance, and so forth?

The generations as they pass by are affected differently by some truth or aspect of truth, as well as by the outward circumstances of life, and so their faith is subjected to tests peculiar to their time, and a variety of power, of heart, of mind, a variety of character is developed, and so each age has its own particular characteristics. All excellence does not belong to our own time. We at our best bring into the city of God but part of that which, taken altogether, constitutes its glory.

And so with the differences that exist between men of different nations. How different are nations of the East from us here in the West. Shall we say that their subtlety of imagination and thought, their natural delight in what is gorgeous in colour or metaphorical in expression, their exuberant expression of their feelings by their acts which astonishes us with our cold phlegmatic disposition, is all mere weakness of character?

They have a greatness of their own which is not

after our pattern, but it has its place in the Divine scheme of the Holy City. So it is that the Holy City stands in the vision with its gates open all day (there is no night there), and the gates face all the quarters of the world, and they shall bring the glory and the honour of the nations into it.

The gates bore the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. The entrance into the Church of God was at first through the chosen nation, but the nation, while it was one nation, yet consisted of tribes, of communities, with their varied characters and their varied history. The true Israel, the spiritual Israel, is one, but the entrance into the Holy City is through the communities which form the one true Israel, and they too vary in their character and their history.

This continued gathering in within the walls of the Holy City of lives and characters varied and imperfect and yet with that peculiar excellence and glory which is theirs through the presence of God with them in His Church, is what we have to keep before ourselves as we look back on the history of the Church's past life or as we regard the work which the Church has to do in this our day.

"The nations shall walk amid the light thereof : and the kings of the earth do bring their glory into it."

It is God's purpose for His Church. It is the great idea which the Church in her work here on earth is to hold up before herself as that to which she is to attain. She is to be the means through which the light of God's truth as manifested in Jesus Christ is to be set forth before men, that they may see it and live in it and by it. There is the great promise for men in their communities, in their nationalities as well as in their individual lives, that life in its highest, freest, truest form, in its activities, in its enjoyment of existence, in its ordered ways, is theirs as they walk amidst the light with which the Holy City

is radiant. This is the high purpose and outcome of the Church's work. This is the purpose of the Church's work as it establishes the work in the old places or looks out on the world and sees new work before it.

It is a promise, but the promise is to those who realise its terms and rise to its loftiness, and enter into its spirit and strive to attain to it; it is a promise which is an incentive to work, prescribing its aim and showing the heavenly pattern of the mode of accomplishing that aim.

It is the promise to, and the pattern of, all Church work, and so of such work as that which is especially before us this morning in the work of the great Church Society, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel.

The aim of that Society always has been and is to plant the Church in its fulness in every part of the British Empire, and then onwards beyond the limits of that Empire as opportunities of doing this present themselves.

This it is that is before us, to go forward as God calls us to set before men the Holy City of God, that the nations may walk amid the light thereof and the kings of the earth may bring their glory into it.

It is the glory of God that lightens it and the Lamb is the lamp thereof. And we have to pray that that glory may be our one and true aim, and that we so hold fast to that which is revealed to us in Jesus Christ, that the Lamb is indeed the lamp in whose light we walk. He is the lantern unto our feet and the light unto our paths. Our first great care is that we look to God for the light of His truth and that we hold fast the faith once delivered unto the saints. It is from above. The Holy City with its Divine light cometh down from heaven. It does not grow up through man's device and labour. It is not a transformed and purified Babylon. It is not of earth, but from God.

But with holding fast the faith we have also to learn how to gather in all that is greatest and best in the world, all that is highest in intellect and in character.

“He hath shown His people the power of His works in giving them the heritage of the heathen.” We have to be ready to accept the differences, the variations of life and character which stand below the unalterable truths of revelation, and to learn how to tolerate them, aye, how to welcome them, for they have their part in the glory of the Holy City.

And this we must say about the direction in which our work is to advance.

If the nations are to walk in the light of the city, surely our first care must be that our own nation can do this. This is our first responsibility. And our nation is not confined within the limits of these islands; it is not bounded by the limits of the endowments which the devotion of past ages have provided within these islands. The Church’s responsibility that the nation may walk in its light stretches out wherever the nation has gone.

This is the primary work of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel.

And then again, if we would gather in the best, we must give our best in that work. We must as individuals give our best; we must as a Church give our best men to the work; so do we bring our glory into the Holy City.

The vision of the Holy City in which we trust that we, each of us, have a place, and whose glories thrill our hearts, is a vision of responsibility as well as of glory.

How are we meeting our responsibility? There is much which we have to lament, much of which we need be ashamed, if we look back on the history of the past or regard the feebleness of too much of our work in the present. Men indeed have worked and are working in many a field of labour, true to the faith, examples of

all that is good, giving their very best, and not stopping short of the gift of their life ; but the labourers are few. England has not risen to the realisation of the work that it is possible to do for Christ and at His bidding in the world at large, and the glory of that work. Yet with all this let us not forget to acknowledge those signs which God gives us that His good hand is with us in our work. You have but to read the summary of the extension of the Society's work during the last fifty years in that valuable little work, "The Spiritual Expansion of the Empire," to see that the Church is being set as a light to lighten the nations in all parts of the world. "God, even our own God, is giving us His blessing."

The present is a marked year for the Society. Its entrance upon its fourth Jubilee suggests much, it appeals strongly to all to help on a work with so great an idea before it, so great a promise assured to it.

And while there is much in the prospect of work to encourage us, there is also not a little at the present moment which in a special way appeals to our sympathies. For sympathy ought to be aroused by the trials that befall good work and threaten to arrest its progress. And the power of sympathy is given us by God to help us in acting.

We have this striking summary in this year's Report :—

"With the exception of North America, it may be said that in every part of the Empire, and beyond its limits, the work of the Church has been hindered in the past year by disasters and visitations which no human foresight could have reckoned with. In Australia there has been a severe visitation of drought. In the West Indies a series of misfortunes have been crowned by another disastrous hurricane which has swept away churches, schools, parsonages, and of course other

buildings, leaving those islands still poorer than they were. China has suffered from political helplessness, and is the prey of factions and seditions. India has suffered, and is suffering, from cholera and plague, and is further suffering from a terrible famine. While South Africa, for eighty years one of the most fruitful portions of the Society's work, is the scene of a war, the effects of which must be felt, and felt sorely, for a long time to come, not only in the material loss which the Church there must be sustaining, but in the troubles and the trials which it brings into the family life and so into the spiritual life of so many."

There is a call to us, and a deep call, in all this to show in our lives that we who live in the Holy City have been so illumined by its glories that we walk letting our light so shine before men that they may see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven, that we show that we, who profess to follow the Lamb, Who in His pity for man gave Himself for man, can sympathise with others, can endure self-sacrifice, can bring of our best into the Holy City and give it for its building and its advancement.

Pray we to God that the vision of the Holy City may ever be before us as members of this Society, inspiring us with a sense of the greatness of our work, its Divine glory, and its deep and unceasing responsibilities, and that we ourselves in all our doings may walk in the light of that city, and (enabled by the grace of God) have the courage and the devotion and the zeal to bring into it the best that by God's mercy we have to give.

